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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses several definitions of "intelligence" and "mind," concluding that the composing process which involves writing words requires the same acts of mind as the composing process by which we make sense of the world. Based on this assumption, several objectives are offered for developing composition courses for students with learning and language difficulties: students must learn to generate chaos, as the composing process requires choice and chaos is the source of alternatives; after this, students must learn how to emerge from chaos through the ordering process; and students must question and examine their processes of perception in order to differentiate, compare, and classify. It is these processes of definition and formation which encourage the use of language as a speculative instrument and make learning possible. (TS)

Reclaiming the Imagination.

Panel: Innovative Composition Courses for Students with
Learning and Language Difficulties

Convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication

St. Louis, March 13-15, 1975

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Our panel topic is rather less compelling than the convention slogan. The idea of the human mind as the supreme resource is more inspiring than the notion of one more innovative this or that and certainly the concept of mind is no more problematic than the notion of "students with learning and language difficulties." Of course, some difficulties are more difficult than others: you can't expect to teach someone to read a paragraph if he can't read a sentence, or a sentence if he can't read words, or words if he can't construe letters or letter groups. And yet that is not to say that we teach reading by teaching the alphabet. I realize that it is casuistry of a sort to stretch the idea of difficulty, but I do want to claim that "students with language and learning difficulties" is a pretty fair description of students entering college. If our freshmen were not burdened with such difficulties, if they encountered no such difficulties, we would not have to labor to teach them to write coherently, to read critically and to think cogently. I believe that what is good for the best and brightest is essential for students who have difficulties. What we used to call slow learners need the freedom and the opportunities we trouble to offer our prize students. And, in turn, what is important and worthwhile for disadvantaged students will prove to be useful and valuable for the good readers and the practiced writers.

If we tap this supreme resource, the minds of our students, we will find powerful, profoundly rooted capacities which cannot be identified solely in quantifiable terms and quotients, but which we can learn to identify and train. Mind in this sense is not

reducible to what has been called "intelligence" by psychologists looking for something to measure; intelligence is a culture-bound concept as mind is not. Socrates demonstrated his method not with the head of the class but with an illiterate slave boy. Montessori's first school in Rome was for children who had been certified by the state as cretini--morons. It was Brazilian

(peasants who gained the experience of freedom in attending Paulo Freire's literacy classes. The point from which these great teachers of the disadvantaged begin is the mind's operation, the human mind in action. Now, our convention slogan--Let the Minds of Our Students be the Supreme Resource--is a sound point of departure for the composition teacher because composition IS the mind in action! The composing process that involves writing down words requires the same acts of mind as the composing process by which we make sense of the world. Jargon like "non-verbal communication" masks the fact that all perception, all communication, takes place in a world built by language. Man is the language animal and the operation of his mind is a linguistic operation, whether words are spoken or not.

It's very refreshing to have the NCTE and its affiliates publicly declaring an interest in mind. It's a welcome change from the pseudo-scientific concepts we've grown used to: verbal behavior; communication skills; input and feedback; encoding and decoding. But we should be on our guard against becoming ensnared in the problem of defining what "mind" is; and, be warned, this is the game which psychologists and philosophers who deplore what they call "mentalism" like to play and win. (They do not equally enjoy the game of deciding what is "behavior.")

Laboring under the delusion that they are being "scientific," English teachers have all too often asked such questions as "What IS creativity?" "What IS communication?" You may remember that the theme song of the Dartmouth Conference was "What IS English?" That kind of questioning gets us nowhere; it is neither pragmatic nor scientific. J. Robert Oppenheimer explains in discussing this ~~mis~~conception of scientific inquiry that Einstein did not ask "What is a clock?" Rather, he framed questions about how we would measure time over immense distances. We will have to learn to ask not "What IS mind?" but "What happens when we use our minds in writing that is comparable to what happens when we make sense of the world?" "What happens in the composing process?" Josephine Miles has entitled one discussion of composition "What do we compose?" and another "How what's what in the English Language?" Such questions as these will help us develop a ^{working} concept of mind. A good name for the mind in action is imagination: Coleridge called the imagination "the prime agent of all human perception." That is an epistemological concept which English teachers should make their own. I suggest, then, that this panel topic could be re-stated as follows: Teaching the composing process by liberating the imagination.

I will try in this talk to suggest what that might mean when we set about developing innovative composition courses for students with learning and language difficulties.

The one sure principle of composition, as of imagination, is that nothing comes of nothing; ex nihilo nihil fit: nothing can be made from nothing. Recent textbooks in composition have begun to show signs of an interest in the subject of invention, though

the process seems still unclear, if not misconceived. The first use of language which a student of composition has to learn, I think, is in the generation of chaos. If we don't begin there, we falsify the composing process because composition requires choosing all along the way and you can't choose if there are no perceived alternatives: chaos is the source of alternatives. If we are unwilling to risk chaos, we won't have provided our students with the opportunity to discover that ambiguities are, as I. A. Richards has said, "the hinges of thought."

Once we encourage the generation of chaos, however, we are morally as well as pedagogically bound to present very carefully the ways of emerging from it. Happily, the process of generating chaos provides, itself, the means of emerging from chaos by making something of it. I like to demonstrate how this can be so by having everybody in class name what he sees, what comes to mind in response to, say, a photograph from Steichen's Family of Man, with everyone writing down everybody else's word. Twice around the room and there begin to be repetitions; names group themselves like so many birds flocking; three times around the room and the blackboard is full, the sheet of paper covered. (That can illustrate the psychological advantage of having a full page rather than an empty sheet and it suggests that chaos might be better than nothing.) The chaos begins to take shape: classifying, which is organized comparing, proceeds without the stimulus of pre-fabricated, loaded "Study Questions." The primary compositional modes of amalgamation and elimination begin to operate. All this happens more or less without guidance, though if there is a roadblock it can be exploded by asking the only study question anyone ever needs: How does who do what?

The reason that this natural ordering process takes place in the very act of naming is that the mind naturally abstracts. The human mind--but that is a redundancy: the mind naturally orders by comparing and differentiating. (That process of selection apparently goes on in the retinal cells at an electrochemical level.) We see in terms of classes and types; everything we see is seen as an example of a kind of thing. Perception is contingent on the mind's capacity for analogizing.

My point is that we do not have to teach our students HOW to abstract but THAT they abstract. What we do teach is how to listen in on the dialogue in progress when they are looking and classifying in the act of perception. That dialogue is thinking; it is dialectical. Dialogue and dialectic are cognate: learning to see what you're looking at really means learning to question and questioning is the life of thought. The composing process, I think we can say, is empowered from beginning to end by the dialectic of question and answer. The way to bring this fact to life for our students is to encourage writing from the start--not Topic Sentences and Thesis Statements of course, but lists, class names, questions and tentative answers and new questions. This "pre-writing" is writing; a cluster of names is a proto-paragraph; a cluster of clusters is a nascent composition.

To suggest the formal nature of this emergence from chaos I used to employ rather elaborate schematic devices--bits and pieces of signs from symbolic logic, tagmemic grids, flow charts, etc., but the trouble is--and it's not a problem peculiar to students

with learning and language difficulties--the relationship of the sign to its referent is ^{easily} misconceived and the signs ^{themselves} become the focus of interest. I've collected pre-writing sheets covered with diagrams and charts which bore no relationship to the words employed, with whatever concepts might have emerged totally obscured by a mass of lines and boxes. Students have submitted first drafts with the appearance of sketches for ^{a painting of} the Martyrdom of St. Stephen, because they were under the impression that "she likes arrows." Just as we can't teach reading by simply teaching the alphabet, so we can't teach composition by laying out unintelligible floor plans.

The alternative, I've come to believe, is a line drawn down the middle of the page. Over-schematizing is no more conducive to the definition of choices than the formal outline, but opposition as an organizing concept, one which has been borrowed from linguistics by structuralists in all disciplines, can be very helpful to us in teaching composition. Opposition is a highly generalized term covering juxtapositions, alignments, echoes as well as antitheses, opposites and counterpoint. Figure and ground are in opposition; beginning and end are in opposition; character and plot are in opposition. The ends of a scale and the banks of a river represent two kinds of opposition. It is a concept to think with; it is quickly grasped by all students because it is a name for what they are already doing when they judge size and distance and degrees of all kinds. Opposition is the principle informing every phrase they utter, every step they take. I have seen many a student weighed down with learning and language difficulties

come to life smiling at the brand new discovery that composing has anything whatsoever to do with anything else he has ever done. Exercises in forming and developing oppositions not only provide the steps out of chaos; they also become the means of discovering that composing is a dialectical process: it starts and stops and starts again; it can proceed in circles; it is tentative, hypothetical and recapitulative. Our students can learn, when they use the concept of opposition to think with, that composing means naming, differentiating, comparing, classifying, selecting and thus defining; that composing means getting it together. Isn't that what we want to teach them?

"A composition is a bundle of parts": that is Josephine Miles's very useful definition. Composing means identifying the parts and bundling them; in the composing process we recreate wholes by establishing relationships between the parts. All our innovative powers in designing composition courses should go to assuring that writing is involved at all stages of this process. The textbooks that warn glibly or sternly "Don't begin to write until you know what you want to say" ought to be returned to the publishers. The motto of every composition course should be "How do I know what I mean until I hear what I say?" I'm very fond of that old chestnut; here is a more weighty formulation: I. A. Richards, recalling Plato as usual, declares that "dialectic is the continuing audit of meaning."

Some experienced writers can keep track of what they are saying in that interior dialogue and thus can audit their meanings in their heads, but students with learning and language difficulties should write it down, continually. In that way they can learn to

recognize the interior dialogue and to keep the dialectic going. Writing at all stages of composition brings to full consciousness the experience of the mind at work, the imagination in action. Writing ~~can~~^{thus} counters the notion that ideas fall from heaven; that some people just "have" them and others just don't. Writing at all stages is a way of seeing ideas develop. We want to assure that the student continually discovers that it is his mind that is giving form to chaos; that his language is ordering chaos; that his imagination is just what Coleridge tells him it is, "a shaping spirit."

We encourage that experience of writing and thereby the auditing of meaning by providing linguistic forms, syntactical and rhetorical structures, not for imitation but for use as speculative instruments. Forms are not cookie cutters, superimposed on some given, rolled-out reality dough; forms are not alien structures which are somehow made appropriate to "what you want to say." A model is a form, of course, but so is an image. A mold is a form and so is a symbol. Percepts and concepts are forms. Forms are our means of abstracting; or, rather, forming IS abstracting. Abstracting is what the mind does; abstracting, forming is the work of imagination. But this can rapidly become more interesting as metaphysics than as pedagogy. I suggest that we think of forms by considering what they do: they provide limits. "A poet," in Allen Tate's definition, "is a man willing to come under the bondage of limitations--if he can find them." Limits make choice possible and thus free the imagination. The artist creates a shape, a pattern, a design and thereby gives form to feeling.

Consider what Kenneth Koch calls the "poetry idea" in his experimental writing assignments: that's the conception of form we need. Koch gets poetry out of his third graders by making forms available to them. He doesn't say "Tell me what it would feel like to be a geranium in the sunny window." He reads poetry with them and then offers a form which can answer to their experience, their perceptions. "I used to be a _____, but now I am a _____." Or he says, "Talk to something that isn't a person; ask it a question":

Dog where did you get that bark

Dragon where did you get that flame

Kitten where did you get that meow

Rose where did you get that red

Bird where did you get those wings

At first, Koch was apologetic about his dependence on form, but he soon came to see that it was the limits that the forms provided which allowed the kids to discover their feelings and to shape their insights.

This conception of form as limit-providing structure can help us see how all phases of the composing process are related: bundling the parts involves selection and differentiation which are ways of limiting: comparing, classifying, amalgamating and eliminating are ways of limiting. Definition is, by definition, a setting of limits. Every time we limit, we are forming. It is an idea which can help us develop sequences in our innovative composition courses. I. A. Richards has said that all learning depends upon a sequence of "partially parallel tests." Any composition course should be organized so that learning something about syntactical structure prepares for learning

As it is, the new rhetorics every year lay out what the old rhetorics have been explaining since the eighteenth century; that, for instance, there are three modes of writing, called "exposition," "description," and "narrative." Do we create the occasions for our students to discover that argument can take the form of narrative, as in fable? that there is a logic of metaphor, in Robert Frost's sonnets, as well as in Donne's? that description and analysis are both essential to definition? How many Advanced Composition courses incorporate so-called creative writing? It's time our composition courses were themselves composed, that we ask of them unity, coherence, and emphasis.

I have quoted I. A. Richards throughout because he has thought more deeply than anyone I know about the pedagogical implications of a philosophy of mind that stresses the shaping power of imagination. The most important of those implications is that when we are teaching composition, we are engaged in thinking about thinking, talking about talking; we are seeking to comprehend more comprehensively, to discover the means of discovery. If imagination is our point of departure, the guiding concept for all our effort must be that, in Richards' words, "there is no study which is not a language study, concerned with the speculative instruments it employs." If we let the minds of our students be the supreme resource, it means that we will be recognizing that language is "the supreme organ of the mind's self-ordering growth." (IAR) It is language--not vocabulary or a sophisticated repertory of syntactical structures, though we can work on this; not the students' very own language and not the teacher's--it is language

as a form-finder and form-creator, language as a speculative instrument that makes possible naming and opposition and definition; it is the power of language as a form that creates order from chaos; it is language that frames the dialectic, limits the field, forms the questions and answers, starts the dialectic and keeps it going; it is language that makes choice possible. That is why we can say that to learn to compose is to discover both the power of the mind and the meaning of human freedom.